



From: **AUTISM SPEAKS**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Autism Speaks Joins Georgia Families in Praising Senate for Unanimously Approving Study Committee of Insurance Issue

Ava's Law Remains Necessary to Change Insurance Law and End Healthcare Discrimination Against Children with Autism

ATLANTA, GA (March 12, 2009) -- Autism Speaks, the nation's largest autism advocacy organization, today joined with families in Georgia to applaud State Senate President Pro Tem Tommie Williams (R-19) in obtaining a commitment from the Senate to establish a committee to study Ava's Law, Senate Bill 161. This committee will be charged with examining the autism insurance reform issue and developing ways the state legislature can stop discrimination by insurance companies of Georgia's children with autism. Senator Williams was inspired to get involved in the issue of autism insurance reform by his four year old niece Ava, who has autism. The Senator worked tirelessly as a cosponsor of Ava's Law, and helped shepherd the bill through several committees.

On floor of the Senate this afternoon, Senator Williams delivered a rousing speech, suggesting that rather than attach meaningless amendments, that would serve to cripple SB 161, that the Senate table the issue for further review and commit to passing a stronger version of the bill in the 2010 Session. The Senate erupted in a standing ovation of support.

"While passing Ava's Law to provide families with immediate relief and children with effective coverage this year would have been preferable, we are encouraged that the Georgia Legislature has committed to take this issue seriously and conduct a further review to solve a very real problem that families all over this nation are forced to deal with on a daily basis with regard to the medical care and treatment of their children with autism," stated Elizabeth Emken, VP of Government Relations for Autism Speaks. "We greatly appreciate the leadership demonstrated by Senator Williams, as well as Senator Johnny Grant, the author of Ava's Law."

The intent of Ava's Law is to require private health insurance companies to provide coverage for medically necessary, evidence-based treatments and therapies for children with autism as prescribed by their treating physician, including coverage for applied behavioral analysis therapy. To date, eight states – Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Texas -- have enacted autism insurance legislative reform that requires insurers to cover ABA therapies, which typically cost upward of \$50,000 a year – a cost well beyond the means of most families.

"I would like to thank advocates statewide for taking the time to work so diligently on Ava's Law. I especially thank advocates for making calls over the last few days to Lt. Governor Casey Cagle, who listened to our pleas and released the bill out of the Rules Committee, sending it to the Senate floor for a vote," said Bill Jones, Georgia Chapter Advocacy Co-Chair for Autism Speaks. "Autism advocates in Georgia succeeded in bringing the issue of autism insurance reform to the forefront and to the attention of members of the Georgia State Assembly. Rest assured that we will be back next session with even more voices to get Ava's Law passed!"

Autism Speaks thanks the primary co-sponsors of SB 161 for championing the bill at every turn which include: Senator Johnny Grant (25th District – Milledgeville), Senator Tommie Williams (19th District – Lyons), Senator Eric Johnson (1st District – Savannah), Senator Don Thomas (5^h District – Dalton), Senator Bill Cowsert (46th District – Athens) and Senator Dan Weber (40th District – Dunwoody).

About Autism

Autism is a complex brain disorder that inhibits a person's ability to communicate and develop social relationships, and is often accompanied by behavioral challenges. Autism spectrum disorders are diagnosed in one in 150 children in the United States, affecting four times as many boys as girls. The prevalence of autism has increased tenfold in the last decade. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have called autism a national public health crisis whose cause and cure remain unknown.

About Autism Speaks

Autism Speaks is the nation's largest autism science and advocacy organization, dedicated to funding research into the causes, prevention, treatments and a cure for autism; increasing awareness of autism spectrum disorders; and advocating for the needs of individuals with autism and their families. Autism Speaks funds more than \$30 million each year in new autism research, in addition to supporting the Autism Treatment Network, Autism Genetic Resource Exchange, Autism Clinical Trials Network, Autism Tissue Program and a range of other scientific and medical programs. Its Government Relations Department, through its Autism Votes initiative, has played a critical role in securing federal legislation to advance the federal government's response to autism, and has successfully advocated for insurance reform to require insurers to cover medically-necessary autism therapies. Notable awareness initiatives include the establishment of the annual United Nations-sanctioned World Autism Awareness Day on April 2 and an award-winning, multi-year national public service advertising campaign with the Ad Council. Autism Speaks' family services efforts include the Autism Video Glossary, a 100 Day Kit for newly-diagnosed families, a School Community Tool Kit and the distribution of community grants to local service providers. Each year, Autism Speaks *Walk Now for Autism* fundraising events are held in more than 70 cities across the country, as well as Canada and the United Kingdom.

Autism Speaks was founded in February 2005 by Suzanne and Bob Wright, the grandparents of a child with autism, and provides a voice to hundreds of thousands of families. To learn more about Autism Speaks, please visit www.autismspeaks.org.